

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:  
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: BOWA TUCKER [AFRICIA – BONTHE]**

**INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL**

**DATE: JANUARY 10, 2008**

**C = CHRISTOPH**

**B = BOWA**

**Tape 08.20**

C: Okay, Anonymous 3, you used to live in the Pawtucketville neighborhood of Lowell, right?

B: Yes, that is right.

C: Could you tell a little bit about your family's migration history? Why did you decide to come to the United States, why Lowell?

B: Sure. My father actually decided for my sister and myself to join him. He had already been here in the States. I was very young then, I think I was in my teens and he wanted us to join him, so he went and got us.

C: Where were you from originally?

B: Sierra Leone.

C: And was this situation affiliated with the civil war, did your father want you to be out of the country at the time, or was it after or no connection?

B: It was way, way before. We came in the seventies. At that time there was a lot of stability in the country, even though we had a leader who in many respects would have been considered a

dictator, because we had a single party system. But there was no fighting. My mother and my father were here in the states and we had stayed behind in Sierra Leone until they got fairly stable and then they decided we should join them.

C: Were you raised by your grandparents at the time, or your aunts and uncles?

B: My uncle and his wife.

C: In Sierra Leone did you live in the city or the countryside?

B: It was on an island. I don't know if you're familiar with a map of Sierra Leone, but there's a little island called Bonthe and that's where I lived.

C: When you found out you would be moving to the United States, did you have preconceived ideas about what it would be like coming here?

B: Oh yeah, at that time, most people aspired to come to the United States and I'm sure to a large extent the people still do, and it was viewed as the paradise on earth, if there's any such a place. And so there was a lot of excitement about coming to America. I was absolutely ecstatic when I learned that we were going to be coming.

C: And did that bubble burst a little when you got here?

B: To some extent. I was amazed by tunnels, those kinds of things I couldn't understand. And we would be driving on the highway and someone would point out the fact that we were driving under water and I still find that difficult to comprehend, how that can be possible. The roads, the buildings, the stores, the skyscrapers, those things fascinated me, and then I found out that people are just people anywhere. There's no significant difference whether you're from a village or you live in the most advanced country in the world. I think human beings have the same fundamental needs and there not that much different.

C: Did your family live in Lowell from the outset or did your family move around in the US a little bit?

B: Moved around in the US, but not for very long periods. My father actually lived in Philadelphia, PA, so that's where we met him, but at the time he had been separated from my mother and my mother lived in DC. So, I would go and visit my mom during the summers until my father decided to move to NY, in the Bronx. And I decided to stay with my uncle while I was in Philadelphia and I would visit either NY or DC. Most of my moving around was really on the east coast, Washington, Philadelphia, New York, occasional visits to Boston, that sort of thing.

C: So why and how did you eventually end up in Lowell?

B: Well, I was seeking employment. I went to college at Westchester University which is in PA about thirty miles outside of Philadelphia, and when I graduated in nineteen eighty four. I was seeking employment and my sister had been here with her husband who was then a student at UMass Lowell. He was studying chemical engineering at the time, and the MA economy was very good at that time, it was the time of the "Massachusetts Miracle." The unemployment rate was very low, I think it went as low as four percent or so if not lower. I had not succeeded in getting a job in Philadelphia, so my sister encouraged me to come and give it a shot here, and so really that was the impetus for me moving here was to try and get a job. Initially when I came, I was not impressed. Having lived in Philadelphia and coming to a place like downtown Lowell, there's no comparison especially if you look at the central business district and the buildings and different commercial enterprises. There's nothing here, and I was like, "What? And this is considered a city?" But surprisingly it's been nearly twenty five years now, I'm still around.

C: When I think of Lowell now, I think of a fairly strong Sierra Leonean community. Was this already the case at the time or have you seen this growing?

B: It has gone through different phases. When I came here in the mid-eighties or so there were only maybe a handful of Sierra Leoneans at the time, and those were primarily students. People did not come here to settle and raise a family. Either being here by virtue of being a student and deciding not to leave afterwards, there were very few Sierra Leoneans at the time, but because the economy was so good, and the health care industry in particular was very ripe for hiring a lot of immigrants to work in these elderly facilities. And so we started to see a huge influx shortly after I came, somebody knew somebody who knew somebody and then we started to see a gradual increase in the number of Sierra Leoneans. I don't know if Lowell went through a recession in the early nineties or what have you, but we started to see a significant movement out of Lowell. People started to go somewhere else, but a good number still stayed and since then we've seen a very gradual migration from Lowell. It's not the number we had in the early to mid nineties. I would say from nineteen ninety two to nineteen ninety six a lot of people left.

C: Do you have any idea where they went?

B: Some people moved to NH, some people moved to the suburbs, but not that many. I would say most moved out of state towards the DC, Virginia area. Very recently we have seen a number of folks that have left the community to go to Ohio, because I guess Ohio is deemed very good as far as the cost of living and what-have-you.

C: Is it the Columbus area there?

B: Yeah.

C: I've been noticing that Columbus is having a growth in the African community there. It seems like a lot of the migration out of Sierra Leone happened before the civil war there?

B: Yeah, most of the current arrivals are what one would consider refugees, but prior to the civil war I think, especially for people who had the means to study abroad, they would generally send their children out to go and study. But I think during the civil war there were a lot of civil service agencies that helped process paper, refugee papers, to get people out of the war situation. So a good number of folks left on that basis, but I don't think a lot of them settled here. You have families that have been here, but had relatives back there and I think that helped to get their family out, especially those who may not have had the legal status... they used that as a way of gaining legal status here.

C: So a lot of people are moving to the DC area as well, I've noticed it has a growing African community as well.

B: Yes, I can think of people, several dozen people, who have moved to DC.

C: I want to switch now to your life in Lowell and what that was like. Have you lived in Lowell since the mid nineteen eighties?

B: Yeah, I haven't moved out. I have grown to love Lowell and I live in the Greater Lowell area now. It's been almost twenty five years.

C: When you were living in Pawtucketville, did you consider yourself as being part of that neighborhood? Were there African businesses there you could go to, institutions like churches that you would attend there, or was Pawtucketville just a place you happened to live?

B: I initially lived in Centerville when I first moved to Lowell for a very brief time because I was staying with my sister and her husband, but then my first apartment was at Westminister Village which is on Pawtucket Blvd going towards Tyngsboro. Westminister Village is a huge apartment complex. It's actually a village of its own with a convenience store right there and some other small businesses at the plaza. Then there's a church we used to attend, the Church of the Nazarene, which is walking distance from our apartment on Vernon Ave. During those initial periods, we didn't know a lot of people, so I can't say we were actively engaged in doing neighborhood or community kinds of things, but as time went on, the complex actually had a community center, that was used by the residents for functions or whatever and we would use the center when we celebrated a kid's birthday, for example, and invite friends and some of the neighbors we knew. But I can't say that outside of the people we knew, we went out of our way to know who our neighbors were or interact with them on a regular basis.

C: No that makes sense, that's how most people live their life. There's a neighborhood component which the Park is very interested in and that's why I'm asking these questions. We're

trying to find out if neighborhoods are really that central to communities or if they're not. Would you say that your circle of friends in the eighties and nineties were primarily Sierra Leonean, or were they neighbors and it didn't matter?

B: It was a mix. When we lived at thirteen-thirteen, we had a neighbor that lived downstairs from us and she has passed on, but she was involved in an auto accident, but we became friends. She was an Anglo woman and I don't know her ethnicity, for lack of a better word, but I know she had a European heritage and we were very close with her. We would visit with her and she would come and visit with us. She had a daughter. But for the most part it was either Sierra Leoneans or folks from other African countries. People who lived in the complex, Ivorian, Cameroonian, Kenyans. It was mostly people who were also African.

C: Are there African stores where you buy maybe groceries or music or whatever, or do you frequent the mainstream stores like Market Basket and Hannafords?

B: We shop at both. For the most part I think we do most of our shopping at DeMoulas or Market Basket, but for certain special dishes, we do have a number of African stores that sell some of those items and we go there for those needs. For the longest time we would actually drive to Boston, Boston Tropical Food Market, and also Haymarket to do most of our shopping for food items. Eventually, I don't recall if it was sometime in the mid nineties or so, the first African store was opened in Centralville by some Liberians who partnered and so we started to go there for some of those shopping needs. And then we just saw a growth of so many African stores, but I think for everyday shopping needs we still go to Market Basket and then for the special things we go to the African food stores.

C: What types of food do you eat most frequently?

B: Rice is our staple food. My ethnicity, I'm considered a Shabro, but we've been integrated so much into the Mende tribe that people think we're Mendes, but if you go way back we're really Shabros, but the Mendes have dominated a lot of other groups. So, for the ethnic group that I belong to the food is cassava. A lot of cassava, a lot of plaintain, yam, those kinds of food, but for a staple it's really rice.

C: So you used to live in Lowell, now you live in Tyngsboro, but you still work in Lowell. Let's move over to family issues...did you meet your wife in Lowell or while you were still in PA?

B: It was an arranged marriage I should say. She was home and I was here and we corresponded. We initially saw each other in New York, but it wasn't a situation where we dated each other. Some people think that's weird.

C: Statistically those things have a higher chance of survival.

B: Well, it's been twenty five years.

C: So it can't be all that bad!

B: And I think people consider the family and the impact it will have on the family if things don't work out, so people try to make it work.

C: But I think that's every type of relationship even if you're madly in love with the person that you date. I think relationships are work, so it doesn't sound weird to me at all and is actually quite common in most of the world.

B: In India they do a lot of that as well. It's not so modern; I think the younger folks have moved away from that. The folks who are educated tend to want to go through this romantic thing first, so it's strange, I'm not a traditional person. I think part of it was that I didn't want to disappoint my parents.

C: Have you been able to go back to Sierra Leone at all in the last twenty five years or so?

B: Yeah, I was there in two thousand and two last which is almost six years ago. I had been there prior to that as well. Maybe if things go well, I'll go visit again this year.

C: Do you still communicate with family back in Sierra Leone and if so, how do you do that?

B: Telephone. The cell phone, as you know being someone who studies Africa, is being used. Even the guy in the most remote village has a cell phone nowadays. We get a lot of calls. Communication has improved tremendously. Prior to the availability of cell phones, it was really hard to communicate through the mail. Letter writing took months, but nowadays we can get calls on a weekly basis, and we do. Everybody needs something, so we send it.

C: Is there a lot of kinship pressure to comply? I know with a lot of African friends that I have who live in the United States; it's always a concern, all of these demands that need to be complied with. Is that sometimes strenuous?

B: It's very strenuous. I think it's something I particularly struggle with. On the one hand you want to be able to help people, but on the other hand you need to be mindful of the fact you have your own family to worry about, and when people solely rely on you, then inasmuch as you want to help, at what point do you draw that line? So it's a big struggle for me. I try to be helpful, but at the same time I ask am I being really helpful by having someone solely dependent on me? What can I do to ensure that this person becomes self sufficient. It's always a struggle.

C: I think it plays out on the ground too. I just spent some time in Senegal last summer and actually spent a good chunk of time in a village there, and it's interesting to see that a lot of

Senegalese are going to Spain now for work and the cleavages that are occurring now in the community because those members in the village that have family members abroad have a higher living standard. It seems to be creating some pressures in the communities there, so I understand your worries about sustainability, but on the other hand when someone asks you for help can you really...

B: It's a big struggle and on both sides, not just my family, but my wife's family as well. There's a lot of pressure on us to help folks and it's a big issue.

C: Do you have your own children as well?

B: Um-huh.

C: What would you like the future of your kids to be like?

B: Well, for me I really put a lot of emphasis on education. I would like to see them be college educated, and to see them become responsible persons, not only for themselves, but for society. So that's what I aspire to for them, to be of use to themselves and to society. It's equally hard when you raise kids who don't necessarily have the same vision that the parent might have. That can be very frustrating.

C: Do you feel there are intergenerational tensions a little bit?

B: I think that's clearly an issue. I'm a very liberal person, but I think as one grows older, your values shift a little bit and you want to enforce some of that on your children, and they may not be at the same place as you, so that creates some tensions. And what you may aspire for them may not jive with what they want, so trying to deal with that tension can be problematic at times. Not only that, but you mix in the cultural dimension...that of being raised here and coming from a different country, even though I was influenced a lot by this culture here, that creates tension as well.

C: That actually makes a nice transition to my next set of questions which is: Is there something you would like your kids to carry on from your family's past background and beliefs, and also do you teach them about their ethnic identity?

B: I guess to the best one can I suppose. I wasn't raised in the village or in an environment where a lot of these traditions were really passed on to me, so I think I missed out on some of that myself. But the ones that I am aware of I try to impart.... We do libation occasionally and libation is, for example, when a loved one passes on you do certain ceremonial things to acknowledge them, those sorts of things. Whether they're going to practice that is another question and is not one we practice on a regular basis, but on occasion.

C: I also think teenagers in mainstream society and in immigrant communities often seem to have a little bit of rebellion going on.... They might not do it now, but pick it up later, or they might be just complaining...

B: When they were a lot younger we used to do the African clothing so that they knew their parents came from a different place and that's how they dressed, but even with me, you'd never see me dressed like that anymore.

C: Any particular reason?

B: I don't know if this has anything to do with identity really but I am pretty much, I like a suit and tie when I'm going to a wedding or important ceremonial things, and I don't know if this is in part being influenced by being here, but I've always just loved that all male attire of wearing a suit and tie. I don't know if that's a European thing, or an American thing, I don't know. Once in a while I will wear my African gowns, but it's just not something I do regularly like some folks.

C: Let me switch briefly to identity since you provided a nice transition again. Identity questions are difficult because they're a multi layered. Do you consider yourself African? American? African and American? Sierra Leonean? How does identity play out for you?

B: I don't have any identity issues really as far as knowing who I am as a person. I'm an African living in America who has become American by nationality, but I am first and foremost, African born. That will never change, but I am an American citizen. I don't know if you would term that African-American or what.

C: Well, it doesn't matter what I term it, it matters what you term it, and this is very insightful to me, and I think it goes along with a lot of people of your generation.... The Africans that I have talked to around town.... It's a very similar reaction that I get.

C: Is it the same for your kids?

B: That's a good question and I don't think we've spent much time having that conversation in terms of how they see themselves. They are eighteen and seventeen and I think that they know their folks are African, but they were born here, so they probably consider themselves American. But I think there's a link to the African heritage even though they've never been to Africa.

C: Obviously in Sierra Leone English was the main language, but did you also speak other languages when you were growing up?

B: Yeah, I speak Mende I speak Krio which is like a broken English, pidgin English, whatever they call it. Those were the two main languages, then of course in school we learned how to speak English, but English was not used predominately outside of school. Krio was the main



mode of communicating and Mende as well for us. But in school we had to learn how to speak English and that was what we spoke or tried to speak. And we would laugh at kids who spoke vernacular, who's English was not very proper in school.

C: In Senegal, for example, Wolof is becoming a more important language compared to French. In Sierra Leone is Mende becoming the universal language or is Krio still the main language?

B: Krio is simply because it's the medium by which most people communicate. There are so many different tribes, let's say the majority will speak Krio, but you will not find tribes speaking the language of other tribes. It's just sort of the way things are.

C: Are your kids English only or were you able to teach them some Krio?

B: They understand Krio and some Mende, but they don't speak it. We can communicate but they won't actually talk.

C: Which is also pretty natural among immigrants in the United States, that the kids often understand because they hear the parents speak it, but they don't necessarily talk.

B: And I think that's a disservice to the kids really. In retrospect I wish I had been able to ensure that they were able to speak the language. And I think this is quite common especially among Africans, we make this move and make the mistake of not teaching our kids how to speak the native language. I think especially when they are very young they could acquire those things and we don't do it.

C: Do you think there's a particular reason for that? Is it a time issue?

B: Well, I think we don't think about it in those terms, because really when we think about language acquisition, at a very young age you start speaking and communicating to a child and the child responds. It doesn't really take extra time to teach the child. I think we just really don't think about the importance of it and we get wrapped up in a society that speaks English and then we continue speaking English without thinking about where we're from and how we would like our kids to continue this language and culture from which I came from. We don't think about that, there's not a conscious effort made by the majority of immigrants, especially African immigrants. There are exceptions of course. There are some people who will make sure their kids learn their language, but I think by and large that is not the mode in which we think. And you know you're surrounded by TV, radio, the influence and the impact of the dominant language, the mainstream, you don't...it's hard to deviate from that.

C: During your life in Lowell did you change jobs a lot while you were around here or was it pretty stable?

B: During those initial years when I originally moved to Lowell I actually worked in health care taking care of the elderly. And I worked for an agency that sent me to different facilities, so in that sense I moved around a lot. But in another sense I didn't leave health care and got into business and then from business to this or that, I pretty much stayed in that industry for a long time until I went to grade school and studied community development and actually started doing community related work.

C: What always impresses me about African immigrants is this drive for education for economic improvement and moral improvement. Do you know the reason for that?

B: We are raised to think that education is really what helps one to develop as a human being and what can pave your way in society. So that's what's imparted to us at a really young age and we grow up thinking education is everything even at the expense of making money for some of us. So really in my case it creates a lot of problems because I'm always stressing it to my kids and to some extent there's rebellion that goes on because they don't see it the way I see it. Education to me, because of the family I'm from, it's a priority, and I regret, I'm approaching almost fifty, and I would have loved to have had a PhD at a much younger age. But that's something that I'm still struggling for, otherwise at my age why would I even bother? But it's really important, and I think it's one that transcends any economic benefit, because I could have rather used that money, learned how to invest in stocks and make a lot of money, but yet I choose to pursue education. So I don't know what drives that, but it's something that I value very much.

C: Is your wife working too?

B: Yeah she is, she's a nurse.

C: Was she able to take some time off when your kids were younger?

B: Not very much, I think she probably stayed home for six months with the first child and then with the second child, we were fortunate to have her mother come to help us with the child at home, but then her mother ended up getting sick and we had to take her back home where she passed away. So the kids didn't really grow up with grandparents or having the external support from other family members, it was only always us, so it was hard.

C: Does religion play an important role in your life? Is church important for you because it provides a social network as well as spiritual growth?

B: It is. I think more for spiritual growth than social networking. We go to a mainstream church and for some reason it's not the same here, people don't interact much, there's not that connectedness you would expect from people who go to the same place to worship. It's like everyone is on their own, so we go for spiritual growth, but really, to connect with people like

one big happy family, that's missing and may-be that's because of where we go. I think there are some other churches, especially within the African community, where that may be the case. I think they have a closer bond amongst the members of the congregation, but in the mainstream churches I haven't found one that extends beyond "Hello," and that's it. It's almost like people are afraid to get close to anyone.

C: So do you do any social networking, or do you not have time for it?

B: No, I don't. At one point I was very actively engaged in the community, spending a lot of time trying to organize within my own community, but I felt really burnt out by all that and I felt like what I was trying to do wasn't being appreciated by anyone else. So I think I've kind of retreated from all that and have become very conservative in the people I hang out with. I could probably count on one hand the number of people I could call really close friends. And partly because I'm busy, or may-be because I'm influenced by the way things are in this society in terms of the individual, what Putnam, in the first of his books, sees as the breakdown of civil society and all those things. I don't bother with that anymore, I'd rather stay home alone and read a book or watch TV or listen to music than call up friends and hang out over a beer and just talk. Maybe part of that is a personality thing.

C: Maybe, but I have found that that's not unusual either. Are there any particular TV programs you like to watch or any special type of music? I love West African music, so...

B: Oh yes. I love African music, I love reggae. I like to watch the news of course and every once and a while I watch Link TV, I don't know if you know Link TV, but they do a lot of non-mainstream type journalism just to give you a different perspective from what the mainstream reports.

C: I do a lot of stuff with the Internet, but I don't have cable.

B: I know cable is something that can be expensive, but there are some really good TV programs, Animal Channel is one. You learn about the way they live and see there's not a lot of difference from between the way human beings live. And also on Link TV I've learned a lot of different things, like about the link between slavery from East Africa to the Arab world. I didn't know about that history. There was one program on that and it was real eye-opening to me. So there's a lot one can learn from documentaries and those sorts of things on TV.

C: Do they have good African news coverage or do you still keep up with what's going on in Sierra Leone?

B: I don't actively seek it. At one time I did, because with the Internet now it's accessible, but somehow I'm not engulfed in it. I like to read African news which is produced by BBC.

C: The Web Page?

B: Yeah, but there's a publication too on African News. I get that at Barnes and Noble. It informs me about what's going on, on the continent. But that's the extent of it. As for actively seeking out what's going on a regular basis, no.

C: Do you get visitors from Sierra Leone at all?

B: Yeah, occasionally. Last year, my wife's uncle who had been Vice President, visited us.

C: I went to hear him speak!

B: Yeah, and every now and then we'll get a relative here and there, but that doesn't happen frequently.

C: How long do folks usually stay when they come?

B: A couple of weeks. We've never had a long term visitor.

C: Do you take them to any particular places, or do you just chill at home with them, or do both?

B: We do both. We like to take them to learn about the city, go to Boston, that sort of thing. I like to go to the Kennedy Library every now and then with visitors.

C: Do you do stuff with the National Park here in Lowell at all?

B: Now that is an interesting question, and part of that is because as human beings we are always looking beyond our immediate neighborhood and community and sometimes we don't realize the really important and valuable things that are right next to us. So I think it's more based on that than anything else.

C: Do you think, if there were more African related exhibits, like on African immigrations, would that entice you to go and visit?

B: I think so. I know that at one time Middlesex had some affiliation with the New England Folk Life Center? I don't know if there was some funding that came through and they were trying to create some folk life center that would engage people from different cultures into doing different things and learning about different cultures, but we did a number of things with them, demonstrating how to prepare food that came from Sierra Leone and we also tried to bring in an exhibition to Lowell, the Gulhas, I don't know if you're familiar with The Gulhas, but they're African Americans from the [South Carolina Sea] islands, and we were trying to bring that her.

So I think if folks are more connected with stuff that relates to them there would be more involvement. I honestly believe that.

C: And I think that's one of the things we are interested in and sort of update the history and the changes that have happened in the community.

B: I think that was part of Mogan's vision, and I don't know if that's the direction that you folks are trying to go into, it certainly would be a good one if you really want to engage the community.

C: Are you involved with the African cultural festival?

B: Yeah, I was one of the committee members that initially planned the first one and I have stayed connected to it. Every now and then I have served as the Master of Ceremonies, so yeah, I'm very connected to it.

C: Let's switch over to power and politics. Are you registered to vote and do you generally vote in elections?

B: Yes.

C: Did you think, as a person of African descent living in Lowell, that people were politically representing you? That mainstream politicians reached out to the African community and tried to find out what your needs were?

B: I think in the recent city council election, I don't know if I should state this person's name, but I know Mehmed Ali for example, he really made a concerted effort to reach out to all the immigrant populations. And I think a number of politicians on the council, I can't say all, do acknowledge this population outside the mainstream, and want to hear their voices and to be able to represent them. I know for example, Bill Martin and Rita Mercier when she was mayor, would always be at the flag raising ceremony when the city allows different countries to showcase their flag on a given day that's important in their history. And they would always be there. Beyond that, I can't say, but I think if people make their needs known to people who are in power, I think there might be some effort made to try to address them, but if you're talking about the candidates actually taking the initiative to go out and reach out then that depends upon the individual.

C: Do you feel that the people in the immigrant communities need to be more politically active on their end too?

B: Yeah.

C: Do both sides "drop the ball" in a sense?

B: I think so. People who are in power will always be receptive to people who want their issues addressed, especially if they know it translates into votes, but I think the community as a whole, either they recognize the importance of it and don't exercise it, but there really isn't much engagement to what's happening in the political arena of the city. And I think that is really to be put on the community because society encourages that you know. I know part of my frustration in trying to organize the community was based around that, there was no sense of civic responsibility, everything has to be connected to a "what's-in-it-for-me" mentality, and it doesn't always work like that. So it was very hard. I think I was probably well poised to emerge as a potential candidate for the city council if I had really pushed for it because I had been very active in a number of neighborhood activities across the city when I worked for the city of Lowell as Assistant Director of Neighborhood Services. We used to provide services to all neighborhoods in the city so I became well known. If I had aspired for public office to that extent, I'm pretty confident that I would have made it. I hope that doesn't sound too arrogant! What I'm trying to say is that sometimes we as a community don't take on the responsibility of trying to provide support or services within our own community and part of that has to do with the level of frustration we feel when we try to do that, and that discourages us.

C: Would you like to see more immigrants on the city council?

B: I think it only makes sense. Given the demography of the city... it naturally makes sense. When I used to represent the city at the All American city competition which was a competition put forth by Allstate to recognize cities who had actively engaged their residents in public life. The question that always emerged was, they would put together this delegation of folks who would go and represent the city, and the judges would say, "Whoa, I'm impressed with your diversity here, is this representative of your council?" and clearly it was not. So I think it makes sense, but I think it's also important to have the right kind of candidate to make it happen. There may be people who aspire for it, who have aspired for it, but I think they don't get elected for two reasons: one is that given the "Plan E" model we have here in the city where we have a strong city manager and folks elected at large, it makes it hard for people in immigrant communities to get elected at a ward level. I think it makes it easier to get that kind of representation where you have neighborhoods with a lot of certain ethnic groups, but also not having a person with the right kind of commitment to provide services.

C: And also the time it takes.

B: It takes a lot of sacrifice, resources, all those factors I think, discourage people from being engaged.

C: Did you ever endure any racism in the city and if so, what kind of experience did you have?

B: I can't say I experienced it lately. I think it's done in subtle ways, but to say that someone has come to my face and called me a derogatory name or something, I don't experience that here. To try to demean or belittle me blatantly, no. Does racism exist at the institutional level? Some people argue that it does and there's probably a good chance that it does, but it's very subtle, it's not right there in your face.

C: Do you also feel there's tension among different ethnic groups?

B: No, not at all, or not that I'm aware of anyway. I think by and large people are very friendly towards one another. There's not any one particular tension that exists. A lot of Africans go to Cambodian stores for their foodstuffs.

C: And a lot of East Africans go to the Indian stores, the Kenyans.

B: Exactly, so I think, and I don't know how to say this without sounding ethnocentric, but I think by and large, Africans are very nice people. I think nice to a fault. Where other cultures have viewed us as docile and not aggressive, that sort of thing, but even though on the other hand, you look at it and you say, "Well, wait a minute, why do they fight amongst themselves so much," and the instability that exists in a lot of the African countries, but I think towards foreigners, for the most part, people are very friendly in that sense.

C: Well, a lot of the internal problems were caused by colonial border drawing...

B: Yes, I didn't want to go there, but I do think that what we see going on in these African countries is a result of that.

C: Let's wrap this up. Is there one question you think I should have asked you, but didn't?

B: No, I think you really covered everything I expected you would want to cover for the study. I can't think of any.

C: What about if you were doing this study? Is there a question you might have asked that I did not?

B: Well, I think, and this might relate to your initial question, "How do I see myself and my future here in Lowell?"

C: So how do you see your future here in the Greater Lowell area?

B: I think the future is going to be rewarding. I think it's always hard to predict the future of course, but I think my overall goal is to really be of service to folks in Africa. I think that, yes, there are people in need here, but I think the need is not as great as those who are in need in

Sierra Leone. I don't know how I will be able to make such a transition, but that's something that I aspire for.

C: Do you think about going back to Sierra Leone, or would you like to do it through the United States?

B: My ideal scenario would be to work for an agency here and there like the USAID. This way I'm serving this country and being of service over there, because I am a citizen of this country. And then there's the US Department of Ed doing some international education initiative to support literacy in some poor village or what-have-you. A development project to bring electricity to people who don't have clean water.... I think that would be my ideal situation, so I'm serving both the US and people who need the help. So if you know of any job like that....

C: Thank-you so much for your time. I really appreciate it and I learned a lot.